

A Christmas Message

TO OUR

Soldiers & Sailors

CHRISTMAS, 1914

BY THE

BISHOP OF WINCHESTER



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A Christmas Message

“Rejoice . . . again I will say, Rejoice !”

—*Philippians*, iv. 4.

A good text for Christmas that !

“ Nay ! but not for this Christmas,” someone says ; “ no joy this Christmas ! And if you were over here you would know that and no mistake.”

Over here ! For this small letter or sermon of mine is to be sent, I understand, to you on the front, either in the field, in the trenches, and the dug-outs, or tossing and waiting afloat.

Well, it looks like that ! Such a Christmas as we have none of us seen the like of

before : plenty of sorrow and trouble : no joy.

Christmas has been till now our jolly time : children coming home—friends calling in—the Christmas dinner or the Christmas dance—the Christmas tree for the children (by the by, it was from the Germans that we learnt that, and other pretty customs : the Germans, too, love Christmas :)—the curtains drawn—the cosy warmth—the merry game.

And now—*this* Christmas ? How will it be ?

When I wrote this it was a month and more before Christmas. How can I tell how it will be with you abroad, or with us at home, when Christmas comes ?

One thing we have been learning is to

know how little we can trust to-morrow.
“Thou knowest not what will be on the
morrow”—still less in a month.

Where will you be? In France or
Belgium? or beyond? conquering or de-
feated? on the North Sea, still waiting and
watching, or after some terrific clash of
fleets? And we—shall we be having the
enemy here, or expecting him?—or will
you have rolled his hosts and his ships away
from us?

However, it is pretty sure that when
Christmas comes we shall be apart, not
together: there will be a cloud of sorrow
hanging over us—homes out of which there
has been one, perhaps more than one, called
to die: parents, wives, sweethearts, for
whom the light of love and joy has gone out

of life : comrades parted, perhaps for ever on earth. How well we know it all ! England, Britain, the Empire, Ireland “mourning for their children, and will not be comforted for their children, because they are not.”

It does look, then, like a bad text—“Rejoice ! again I will say, Rejoice”?

Yet we want to send you a bright word for Christmas.—Can we do it ?

Think with me.

The name of Christmas speaks to us of two things—GOOD CHEER and GOOD-WILL. Some of us perhaps have thought in past years more of the good cheer than of the good-will. But we have always thought of both. This year Good Cheer will be very much at a discount for you,

and I don't think we shall care much for it at home.

Perhaps our kind young Princess Mary or someone else will have got out to you a bit of pudding, or a packet of cigarettes, or what not? And you will take what cheer you can. Still, not much "good cheer."

But Good-will! Ah, that's a different story. Has there ever been a Christmas with so much Good-will? Why, the whole nation is alive with good-will—throbbing with it! You can't find a town, a village, a palace, a cottage, where they are not at it, trying to *show* good-will because it *glows* in them. If there is one who hasn't found what to do, he or she "won't be happy till they get it"—

something for our brave so diers and sailors (and airmen : we don't forget them, though the name doesn't run over our lips so easily yet) : or something for the wives left at home : or something for the wounded or convalescent : or something for the poor fellows roughing it in the Training Camps, something like Recreation Huts, entertainments, or some help with hymns or camp-services : something for these poor Belgians, the people ennobled by their awful sufferings : or even something for the poor prisoners of the enemy.

And where one can't *do* anything, there is good-will in our hearts, and in yours : good-will for our brave Allies, French, Belgian, and Russian. I know you have

had a hundred instances of the good-will of the foreigners, now friends, in the villages which you have passed through : and you have shown to them good-will, and *rejoiced* (we have got back to the text) with the sheer pleasure of friendliness and human feeling.

Yes ! and is there not a corner in our hearts for good-will towards those poor Germans (however badly they have been taught to hate us !), sent up in droves, so patient and brave, to face the fire and die ? Ah ! there are the sad German firesides, and the sad German hearts, too, this Christmas—hundreds of thousands of them, and the Germans, like ourselves, are such home-loving folk !

Have you read, as I have, in the news-

paper that glorious deed of a British officer, who at the sight of a German agonizing between their lines and ours, gave his own men the "Cease fire" signal, and then plunged into the German firing which continued till they understood what he was about, carried the wounded man into the German lines, was received with their cheers, and came back to be recommended for the Victoria Cross—and to die?

So it is that out of all the horror and fury God brings not only such single deeds, but this great burst of Good-will in our own midst. "Rejoice, again I will say, Rejoice!"

And rejoice the more because this hideous war is the biggest lesson earth has ever received of what ill-will does. A gigantic harvest from seeds of ill-will—

from hatred, suspicion, envy, revengefulness. This is what ill-will comes to, "writ large" among nations. This is what it breeds, "writ small" everywhere among men and women. It ought to be utterly discredited after this.

Rejoice, then, in the Good-will.

May I go on? for there is more to say—and better yet. This good-will—whence has it come among men? and how has it come?

Christ-mas gives answer. It came, from God, through CHRIST. Good-will of man to man, because of the great Good-will of God to all. The Eternal Love of God—His good-will—it was always there, watching over man, preparing the

earth for his dwelling, decking it with beauty for furniture, giving man his wonderful body with its muscles, nerves and brain—and (better yet) fitting him out with gifts for goodness and love, prompting him to use them.

It was always there—this Good-will of GOD ; and good men partly knew it, and rejoiced.

Yet it was unseen ; and men forgot it ; and the world hid it behind a screen of war and wickedness, of cruelty and selfishness and all human ill.

But Good-will could not be satisfied so. GOD had His plan and His Gift.

What was it ? Christmas answers—it was the Child. “ Unto us a Child is born ”—like all other children, yet unlike

them : the One that, growing to be a perfect man, will remain the perfect child, the Only Son of GOD.

He was proof of God's love and agent of God's love : and through Him God's love flowed out into all the streams of human love and good-will, and flows yet.

“ Rejoice, again I will say, Rejoice ! ”

Yes, but can we ? In the face of all that is round us this Christmas, death and destruction, fury and ill-will—a world in rage—Christ forgotten—might defying right : can we rejoice ? can we believe in the love of GOD ?

Has the thought ever come to you, at some Christmas time, as you thought of Bethlehem, and looked on the young Mother's tender child, that in a few years

that same body with its unstained life would be torn, pierced, stripped, tortured, gibbeted, and only left to friends when, drained of life, it must be buried ?

Christmas was beautiful at Bethlehem—but it came to a bad end before long on Calvary, in the world and the devil's cruel triumph. No “rejoicing” there.

Yet was it so ? “was that the end, was that the end ?”

What means then this Cross everywhere, two thousand years later—a gallows turned to glory—the Red Cross of Mercy—the White Cross of Purity ?

How is it that this Jesus, not of Bethlehem, but of the Cross, has a “Name above every name” in history ? How is it that He is worshipped and loved by millions of

every colour and race? What does it mean?

Just this—that God's Good-will is stronger than man's ill-will. "The fierceness of man shall turn to Thy praise." What began at Bethlehem goes on to-day: it broadens out, it is stronger than War, than Dreadnoughts or Howitzers: it turns even the darkness of our pains and sorrows to light: the last enemy that it destroys is death, for Jesus died but Jesus lives, and he that liveth and believeth in Jesus shall not die, but live with Him.

Life masters death. However long the big campaign of God may be, Love shall win at last. All the patience, and the sorrow, and the pain will be gathered up by it, for those who trust.

So Christmas tells us: "Rejoice—again
I will say, Rejoice!" I dare to say it to
you, and to myself.

Good-bye and God bless you.

Edw. Winslow.